

Interview with former LCDR James W. Packard, Jr., MC, USN, attending physician during “Yangtze Incident,” 20 April 1949. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 8 March 2007.

I’ll just ask you some general questions. I wanted to know about your Navy career. Where were you from originally?

I was from Chicago, Illinois. I went to the University of Chicago to start with and then went to finish my degree at the University of Florida. From there I went to Northwestern Medical School.

When did you graduate from the Medical School?

We didn’t graduate until we finished our internship. And that was in 1941. I went right from internship into the Navy.

So you joined the Navy from Chicago?

Oh yes.

And what was your first assignment?

My first assignment was in San Diego and had a wonderful time there. By the way, I was married there in my internship.

San Diego is a beautiful place.

Oh yes. And you know in those days finding a place to live was quite a problem and we were bounced from one place to another. Finally one morning my wife called me and said “I’ve got it!” It turned out to be a houseboat!

What was your specialty at the hospital?

I did general practice.

Where you there the whole time of the war?

No, that was just my first year and a half and then I went into my first sea duty with PT boats on Attu. This was the first US soil taken back from the Japs.

Yes, in Alaska, in the Aleutians.

Well quite a way that is right, right in the Bering Sea--closer to Russia and Japan than it was to the States.

What was your assignment aboard the PT boats?

Well they handed me a bag of tools and said you are the medical officer. I didn’t have much and eventually I got to build a little hospital and even got one of those ambulances. We had a wonderful time. I take cold weather very easily. If they sent me to North Asia I would be skin and bones today. But there in the Aleutians I just thrived.

What was the number of your PT, do you remember?

Yes 13 PT Boat Base 13.

Oh it was Base 13?

I was on the base of course I had to ride the boats especially picking up the fliers and things of that nature.

All right so you weren't just assigned to one PT boat. You were responsible for several?

Well yes, I was responsible for the whole base.

I see.

And you know well I suppose they still do it. They have wonderful men who make machinery and things. And after things quieted down the battle was over why the boys wanted a tonsillectomy and wanted a circumcision and stuff of that nature and I didn't have it. So I drew up plans and the boys in the PT boats, those men that make parts for engines and things would make them for me.

Like machinist mates?

Yes, that is it.

So they would make the instruments you needed, you gave them the specifications and plan and drawings and they made what you needed?

Yes, in fact if you check with the navy medical journal, don't remember its name now, you'll find plans for my surgical table that I built something for doing circumcisions and tonsillectomies , they all made those for me.

So you wrote an article for the Navy Medical Journal?

Yes, I wrote several. In fact I wrote a couple for when I was at the Naval Base in San Diego. You might check that in fact if you do I would appreciate if you would send me a copy of those.

I would be delighted. We have those in our library here.

Do you?

Yes, sir.

Well, Xerox them.

I will be happy to do that. Okay. I'll do it for you today.

Wonderful.

Yes soon as we are finished with our interview I'll go down the library, pull those articles for you, copy them and send to you.

That would be absolutely wonderful. As I've never seen one, I was always busy and I didn't know the ropes anyway.

Well that is an easy assignment for me I can do that for you. Be happy to.

Well great.

So where did you go after the PT Boat Base?

Let's see.

Where you assigned to another hospital?

I'm not sure when I went after I got back from Acqtu. But it was in the states for a while. And my last foreign duty was I was sent to China Nanking, China, as Assistant Naval Attaché.

So this was at the Embassy of Nanking?

Yes.

And this was after the War now about 1948 or '49.

Now I got out of there, remember we use to have a saying the Golden Gate by 48?

Yes!

Well I didn't get back until '49.

So you were in China during the Chinese Civil War. So you were at the embassy would have been 1949?

Yes 48 – 49. You'll have to get that.

That is easy. What were your duties as Naval Attaché or Medical Attaché? What was your title?

I was Assistant Navy Attaché.

I see.

And I did a land house business, believe me.

Tell me what did you do?

Well, a little of everything. Because I had an office but took care of men and women from embassies scattered around there.

Did you have a clinic or infirmary or something?

Oh yes, I did.

Where in the embassy?

Well no outside.

Outside the Embassy?

In those days I took care of anyone who walked in, you see.

So you took care of Americans and Chinese?

Americans, Chinese, the French had a doctor but the French ambassador I took care of them and the British, all British.

What did your facility look like? Was it big, little what did it look like. How was it equipped?

Well, I had a wonderful Chinese nurse Nam Poon and she was wonderful. I didn't do any surgery of any kind and when I went I told them I'm not going to deliver any babies. You know in China...

That is a lot of babies in China?

So I didn't do it. I only delivered two babies in China. One was to a close friend of mine and we still get together here and the other was the Army Attache's wife. She wanted her baby delivered in the Embassy so it would be Indian, you see, from India. So I said yes and I delivered her in their embassy.

What did your clinic look like?

Well it had a couple of rooms...I can't tell you but I was busy from the first thing in the morning until about 5 o'clock at night.

While you were doing all this things were pretty unstable in China that the Civil War...?

Yes, the honor of being bombed by the Nationals and Communists.

By both? Did they bomb the embassy or were you somewhere else?

No, yes well let's see...oh yes the Japanese bombed us in Attu, of course.

So the events that happened that related to the Amethyst incident. How did you find out about it? You had said the other day when we chatted that the Embassy that our ambassador had been warning the British not go up the Yangtze or was it down the Yangtze?

Down the Yangtze. Get off the water, don't go on the water! The Nationalists crossed the river day and night and that was no place to be. English Ambassador he could have told them, he had this ship at the harbor he should have kept them latched.

Tied up? But he let them go?

Yes he sent them for this and sent them for that and I didn't realize it in the process of getting the men off the vessel that I was telling you about but there were four other ships British ships and they killed I don't know how many men. They just shot up how many of those ships, it was terrible and they killed so many of those men.

How did you hear? Where were you when you heard that this *Amethyst*?

The British Embassy asked me to go down because they killed the medical officer.

So they made a request, came to the Embassy, they called you, they said they needed you?

Yes.

How did you find out...

I don't know how they did it but we were close...it was a small community and everybody was close together and I took care of so many of them especially the English.

So when you heard your services were required did you have to ask permission of your Ambassador or did you just go?

Absolutely, probably Sharaf went to our Ambassador and asked for me and of course he said yes and we got into a jeep and went down there.

What did you take in the way of medical supplies?

I took my medical officer my corpsman. But he was a chief.

You took a chief corpsman with you?

Yes and when we got down there I sent the chief back because someone had to handle the medical problems that would accumulate while I was away.

Do you remember what sort of medical supplies or instruments you may have taken with you?

Yes we took a lot of things. IV fluids, of course bandages, and antibiotics and etc.

Who provided the jeep? Was that one of ours?

Yes they went right back with the Chief.

Oh the jeep went back with the chief? When you went down there to go to where the survivors were you went in one of our jeeps?

A US jeep.

So did you go with anybody else or just the two of you?

Just the Chief and myself.

How did you know how to get where you were going?

Well, you always have Chinese to give you directions, etc.

How long did it take you to get there?

We went to Rose Island. I can't remember the number I have the idea it was about 16 men and the dead skipper.

And when you got there what did you see? Were they lying in litters?

Yes they were scattered all over. The Chinese sent me some guards who were very young, untrained recruits practically. I'm glad we didn't run into anyone because it would have mounted to a hill of beans.

So they accompanied you on the trip to Rose Island?

No, no we met them at Rose Island. In China things go rapidly and half the time you don't know what is going on yourself because you don't understand.

Did you have an interpreter or somebody to help you?

No, I didn't. We just did what we could.

When you got down there what is the first thing you saw?

Well, we took the men off the ship those that weren't already off the ship and organized them into a group that we could, including the dead captain, get to the railroad station and I'm not sure how long that trip was.

What kind of injuries did you see?

Oh, they were shot to hell! I'll tell you an example I've had about three phone calls from England and one of the men who was so badly shot up and sometime this month he has to go back for more treatment to his wounds. So some were pretty bad. And we dropped two or three off at a missionary set up on our march to the railroad station because they just couldn't stand anymore of the marching and live.

Did you have Chinese carrying the litters or did you have an ambulance taking them?

No, we had Chinese carrying the litters and the men did of course some were able to walk.

Did you see shrapnel wounds and bullet wounds, did you have morphine and treat them for shock?

Oh yes. Antibiotics and IV fluids, bandages. In my memory I didn't see a station all I saw empty car and we put the stretchers through the windows.

How many of these men were there, do you remember?

That is it, I can't remember the exact number. I'll find out more probably from talking the men, several of the men are still alive and I talked to one on the phone and I'll try to find out exactly how many there were.

I understand then that you accompanied the train?

Oh yes, I went to Shanghai with them.

How long did that trip take?

I'm not sure of that either but I stayed with them and there weren't many experienced men around and I remember giving IV's fluids to men after they were aboard the train.

When you said fluids, are you talking about plasma?

Yes, plasma, IV fluids of one or another.

I see. Guess you had battle dressings and things like that you put on them?

Yes.

And morphine syrettes. Did you have morphine?

Yes.

I bet they needed it?

Oh yes. That was a terrible thing to have shot up boys in a lot of pain.

Did you have anybody assisting you. Because you said the Chief went back?

No. Yes we had to have someone at the Embassy.

So you were the only medical person to accompany these men?

That is right!

You must have been very very busy.

Yes, I was.

So you got back to Shanghai and what happened to the men then? Where were they taken?

Well, we put them aboard their ship and things are kind of complicated from here on in. I'm not certain but my memorance they were all aboard one of their ships but I think from what I've been hearing from these men around now, they went aboard our ship also. I don't know all it was. Gets a little confusing.

So when you finished with this episode then you handed off the patients back to the British and you went back to Nanking?

Well I had a terrible time to get someone to fly me back to the Embassy and finally there was a Naval aviator who took me back to the embassy.

How?

Flew back.

Flew you in his plane? What kind was it a small plane?

I'm not sure. All I know is the Embassy with the airport was under small arms fire from the communists so we just got in in time, I think we jumped off, and he kept right on going. But fortunately he was the only one I could get to get me down there.

So he flew you from Shanghai back to Nanking?

That is right.

I see! So you got back to your clinic there at the embassy or near the embassy and continued as always or were things really deteriorating by then?

Well things quieted down you know we were under house arrest for awhile.

You mean the communists had taken over Nanking?

Oh sure sure.

So when you got back it was already under communist control?

Just going under control why I say the airport was under small arms fire.

What did you do then? How did you continue with your business with all this chaos going on?

Well they put us under house arrest for awhile and after that we didn't have any trouble.

How long did you stay there in Nanking after that?

Let's see, I'm not sure on that. A ship had to take us down there I think that was in the harbour in Shanghai went from there right to McArthur's hold down...fortunately you know he had rules you had to have all your equipment, etc. you couldn't get off the base. But fortunately I had a diplomatic passport and so I got out and stayed in a home not too far away from where the big Buddha was and friends from the embassy put me up.

I'm a little confused. The aviator flew you back to Nanking from Shanghai. Then you were in Nanking for a time but went back to Shanghai?

Yes, that was to get a ship back to the States. But we first stopped in Japan.

How did you go back to Shanghai from Nanking? Did you go down the river or fly?

No I didn't go on the river, I'm sure of that. I probably took the train.

So you took the train back to Shanghai. That wasn't very long after the *Amethyst* incident.

I think it was the *Amethyst* was in April and I don't remember when I got aboard that ship back to the States.

So you stopped in Japan on the way?

Yes.

Did you ever anything about the incident, I understand from the messages I'm getting back and forth that at some point the British sailors were very very grateful for what you had done. And someone had put you in for an award?

Well there was some sort of...yes I know our people thought it was a good idea and I wasn't against it. There was some sort of an arrangement that Serif Stevenson, he was the British ambassador,...

So he knew about it. Did anyone from the British Embassy express their gratitude for what you had done?

Of course, of course.

Then someone was going to put you in for an award a British decoration?

Several of our people put in for it but it didn't come through. The British - who is in charge of the whole Navy in England?

The Head of the Admiralty.

That is it. I got a commendation from the Navy people.

I understand someone recommended you get a very high award but that didn't happen because of the British ambassador?

No it did not.

Ambassador Stevenson said no?

Well, he wouldn't have had anything to do with that...getting it to me was strictly an American idea.

Did you get any American award then? Any Navy award?

No.

Nothing from the Navy?

No.

So really this incident that you participated in and pretty much that was the end of it. And you went about your Navy career after that?

Yes, I all most forgot about the thing.

After you got back from Japan did you have other assignments in the Navy?

Yes and I ended up and I was going to go and get stated for a place at the hospital and they didn't do much of anything.

Which hospital?

No it was in the states and I'm trying to think of where and I think San Diego, I may be wrong. And my mother wasn't doing very well and so I went back and took care of her.

So you actually stayed in the Navy and retired from the Navy?

No. I resigned after 8 years and went into practice.

Where?

Illinois. Before I left as an intern I took care of the wife of ...what was his rank...he had been something in the state medical society for 35 years and so when I got out of the Navy and was looking for a place I went to him and he said 'well Jim why don't you stay here' and I did.

So you stayed in the Chicago area?

No stayed in the Doctor's area.

How long did you have a practice then?

More than 50 years.

Then I understand you went to work on some Indian reservations?

Yes, well that is when I actually retired from private practice. That lasted about 9 months. I couldn't stand it anymore so I went to work on Indian reservations.

Where?

No, mostly at the Rosebud Reservation, which was the first.

Isn't that in South Dakota?

Yes that is it.

Then you retired from that and then you moved to Florida?

Yes. The reason I moved to Florida was because my scholarship in University of Chicago ran out in two years. And it was too expensive for me to keep it up so I went to Florida years ago when I was about six years old my father had some heart problems and he took two of the boys, my brother and myself, and left the two girls in Chicago and came down with my mother. So that is why I knew something about Florida.

Did you have an affiliation with the University of Florida after that?

I elected the University and went there for two years and from there went to Northwestern for my medical degree.

But you ended up back there again?

Yes after I retired from private practice everything else the University of Florida has built this retirement home and it is probably if you have to go some place this is the place to go.

You say that is down near Payne's Prairie?

It is not far from Payne's Prairie. It is Gainesville.

Now all this about the *Amethyst* came rather suddenly that you heard from these old colleagues?

Yes, I don't know what is going on. I hadn't heard from any of them.

They didn't know where you were and then we found out where you were and all want to say "Hi" and thank you for helping them out.

Yes, I'm happy about that.

Do you have any photographs from that time?

I'll see if I can find some but don't know. I think in storage somewhere.

You hadn't really thought about that event until recently when all these people were getting in touch with you.

Yes.

What is your address?

5200 SW 25th Place, Gainesville, Florida

Here is what I'm going to do. I'm going to check those articles for you and we'll make some copies for you and send to you. I want to thank you for sending time with me today. You said you will be away for a month and I'll probably get in touch with you in April.

I'll probably know a few more things if these men keep writing. It will clarify my mind.
At 93, you forget a lot of things.
Thank you, sir, you take care of yourself.
Thank you. Good bye.